Troubles Textiles: Textile responses to the conflict in Northern Ireland

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“Troubles Textiles”: Textile responses to the conflict in Northern Ireland.

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Abstract

Textiles have been used as protest and testimony, storytelling and memory, from the Bayeux Tapestry to Suffrage banners, AIDS quilts and craftivism. War textiles emerged in some cultures exposed to conflict during the 1970s; for example the arpilleras of Chile and Latin America, the story cloths of the Hmong people in refugee camps in Thailand, and more recently memory cloths depicting apartheid in South Africa. This paper presents the textiles that emerged in response to the Troubles in Northern Ireland. It includes individual responses, collaborative community quilts, and artist-led projects for remembrance, healing and peace. In Northern Ireland religious, cultural, political and national differences escalated in 1968 into the sectarian civil conflict known as “the Troubles” which continued for 30 years until the Good Friday agreement in 1998. The textiles discussed in this article date from the Troubles and the post-conflict (but still deeply conflicted) period since then. Textile responses have not been included in art exhibitions or literature about the Troubles and therefore a unique response, almost exclusively by women, is missing from the broader narrative. Primary research was through recorded, transcribed interviews with makers and analysis of the processes and outcomes of their work.

Keywords: textiles, quilts, activism, conflict, war, memory, Ireland, Troubles.

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Introduction

Before the Troubles the regional identity of Northern Ireland was bound up in linen; and the region’s political, cultural and personal identity is still bound up in cloth. Sashes, banners and flags are the symbolic medium for the expression of the Ulster Protestant identity. The blanket, a universal symbol of comfort and care, tucked up and mothered, has a different symbolism in Northern Ireland, it is the protest blanket, the vulnerability of the body, swaddled or shrouded. In protest against the removal of Special Category Status (1976) prisoners convicted of terrorist offences refused to wear prison clothes and wrapped themselves in blankets, this ‘Blanket Protest’ culminated in the hunger strikes of 1981 when ten Republican prisoners died and the ‘protest’ blanket became a powerful, symbolic visual image. The handkerchief with its symbolism of wiping tears, staunching blood, is associated in Northern Ireland with Father Daly’s truce flag on Bloody Sunday – the blood-stained white handkerchief he waved as he escorted a mortally wounded youth.[1] Cloth relates to humanity in its mortality and transience – both cloth and our body can be cut, stitched, age, decay. Cloth carries the traces of our bodies through direct contact, in stains, creases, smell. It evokes memory. The child clings to their comfort blanket and in times of crisis, we too, still reach for cloth and its human connections. Father Daly’s handkerchief was returned with the dead youth’s possessions and the family kept it, his mother and then his sister carried it with them always, describing it as ‘a comfort blanket’.[2] Cloth also serves our lack of humanity in ropes, gags, blindfolds and balaclavas.

In recent years there has been preoccupation with memory and with the past in Northern Ireland, as part of a necessary process of re-examining the past in order to re-imagine it and find new cultural, social and political meanings, so the past can positively inform the future. Part of this process has been a gathering of information on artefacts, including artworks. *The Art of the Troubles* (Ulster Museum 2014) was the first major public exhibition of Troubles art in Northern Ireland, and although it did not include any textiles, the symbolism of cloth is present in many of the artworks. The language of cloth gives us a way to talk about a fragmented society and nation - holes, tears, seams, patches, layers, mending, darning, joining, fraying, ripping - all

ways to visualise and articulate the fabric of society. As well as their role in symbolism and semiotics, textiles have also been used in their own right, as protest, testimony, storytelling and memory and these are the textiles discussed in this paper.

In the late 1960s radical art practices emerged in the United States to challenge authority and demand rights for women, and black and other minorities. The Art Workers Coalition, formed in 1969, brought activist artists together, and Lucy Lippard, a writer and critic was one of them. She visited Ireland in 1984 to select work for an exhibition of Contemporary Irish Art to tour the U.S. and expressed surprise that she saw very little activist art. Historically, the political avant-garde have tended to take a stance on one side of a radical issue; however, artists in Northern Ireland who portrayed the conflict did so in a different way from their counterparts elsewhere. They portrayed it from a stance that Lippard described as, "symbolic neutral ground, caught like the populace between a rock and a hard place."[3] Artists living in Northern Ireland also largely avoided making work based on specific incidents, perhaps because incident-specific work can (too easily) be read as support or condemnation of one side or the other. Artists living and working outside Northern Ireland were more distant from on-going events and had more cultural, social, and political freedom to comment explicitly. In the United States in the late-60s / early-70s feminist artists were working in an activist way with textiles using their marginal position and explicit connections to women's lives to critique patriarchal, hierarchical structures. At this time in Ireland, however, textiles were linked with function rather than creative or political expression and a feminist awakening did not happen until the mid-late 1980s when a new generation of women artists began addressing issues of identity and what it meant to be a woman in Ireland. They produced visceral work that was a feminist interpretation of the landscape or the self and they often used materials and forms that were 'natural' or 'associated with women'.

Individual responses

Catherine Harper writes, "I am Irish, Northern Irish, and from the North of Ireland; each fragment of my national identity bears its own meaning, contested, frustrated, ragged, filthy."[4] Harper grew up in the North where the bog landscape is both deeply

symbolic and practically functional as part of a rural agri-culture.[5] Trained as a weaver at the Belfast School of Art, (Ulster University) in the mid-1980s she used this landscape to explore feminist concerns and the place of women in a divided society. The context of the time and place is important and Harper's bog work was informed by Ireland's prevailing revelations and considerations of "infant bodies found under floor-boards and hidden places", the plight of girls with unwanted pregnancies, the lack of political will to provide abortion, and the ongoing religious conservatism around contraception, illegitimacy, shame and sexual morality. Harper explains, "the bog metaphor was a way that I could talk about kinship and relationships, women, the space of women, without actually having to identify what exactly I was concerned with directly – so oblique".[6] The bog landscape in Ireland has recently become highly politicised as a landscape that conceals and reveals, sucks life down, and gives up bones and fragments of cloth. A 2013 BBC documentary opened and closed with Seamus Heaney reading his poem "Bog Queen" (from *North* 1975) over footage of the bog lands in the heart of Ireland where the bodies of the "disappeared" are believed to lie.[7] Harper's art, like Heaney's poem, takes on an additional resonance in this context, Figure 1.

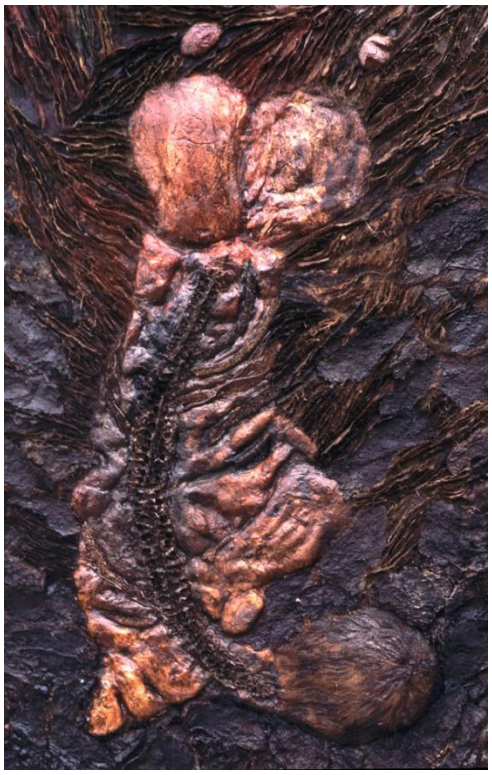

Figure 1
Catherine Harper, *Head Down*, 1990
Mixed natural media and bitumen, 180 x 230 cm

Catherine Harper was born into a “mixed-marriage” (Protestant / Catholic in the Northern Irish context) that failed when she was very young and this became a source of shame and secrecy in a highly conservative and politically-charged society. In 1994, she made *The Big Red* and described it as a personal catharsis, “I suddenly got angry and began to sew this red thing … dyeing red material.” The constructed elements were “to do with the abject” and “the tainted fabric.”[8] When Harper showed it at an exhibition in Galway she hung the walls with visceral red cloth strips, some impregnated with her spit and menstrual blood, and covered the floor in natural, greasy and dung-covered wool fleece; eliciting as one reviewer wrote, “a purging of emotions.”[9] In 1996 having “had enough” of the continuing despair of Northern Ireland’s stop-start ceasefire-atrocity cycle Harper moved to London. While researching gender at Goldsmiths’ College, London she developed a drag queen alter-ego, *Queenie* – “a woman who would dress as a man who would have dressed as a woman” and a distantiation device to allow her to deal with her own highly emotional, gendered and contested response to Northern Ireland’s trauma. *Queenie* was a “taking care thing, a healing thing” and Harper did performances in Derry where she invited people to take off their shirts so she could iron them and scrubbed the walls of Derry “to remove the stains of history.”[10] The performances were offerings of little domestic services (laundering, ironing, cleaning) to try to repair the terribly damaged society from which she came.

Fionna Barber notes that “politically referenced art” had to take “its place among a plethora of representations of the conflict visible within the public domain.”[11] These representations were dominated by media images and some of the more recognisable images of the Troubles are textiles – among them handkerchiefs, blankets and of course flags. Belfast artist, Rita Duffy has worked extensively with the imagery of cloth and cloth relics in her paintings, exploring the complex and nuanced meaning that cloth carries in the context of the Troubles. In *Sleech* (2010) she used the association of flags with identity to explore the idea of changing religious demographics. She asked for donations of “the tattered flags that hang from lampposts” in Northern Ireland to define the political affiliations of specific areas, and made them into “little house shapes … stuffed with hair” because “hair holds your DNA.”[12] Her recent works have a temporal distance from the Troubles that allows them to be understood in relation to both the past and the present. *Sleech*, (a

reference to the shifting, unstable alluvial sand that Belfast is built on) is highly pertinent today in on-going disputes about the legitimacy of flags used as territorial markers on Belfast streets that are no longer predominantly Protestant, Figure 2.

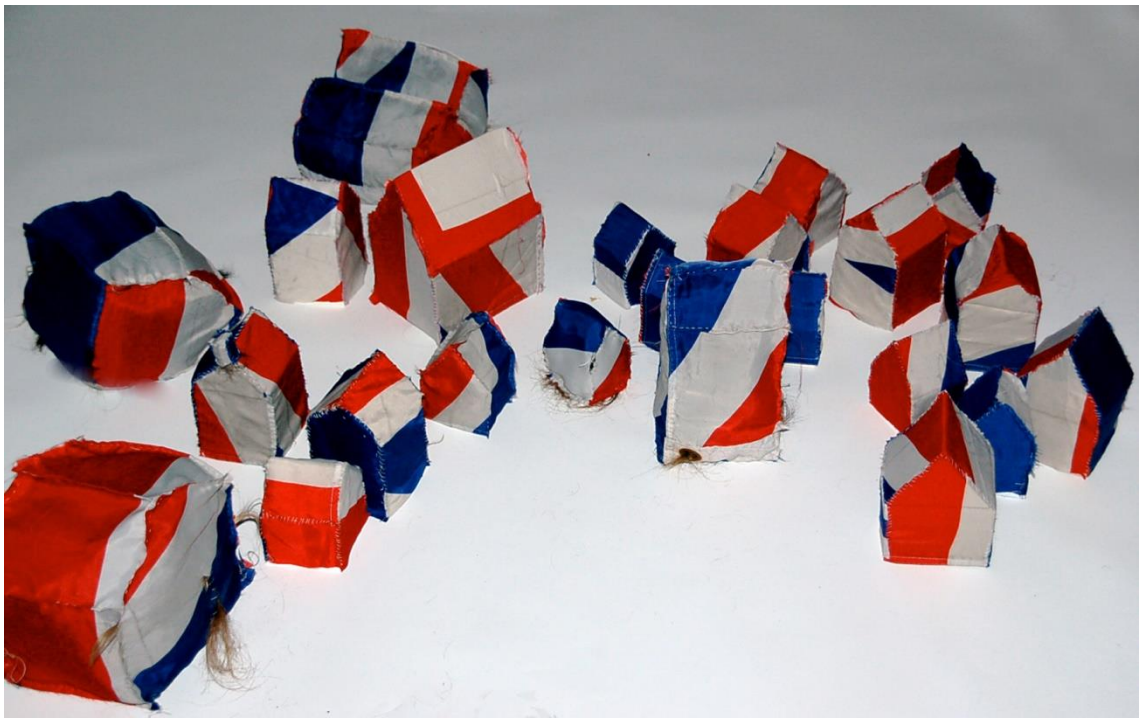

Figure 2
Rita Duffy, *Sleech*, 2010

Figure 3
Helen McAllister, *Shattered Steps*, 2000

Shattered Steps, Figure 3, by Helen McAllister, textile artist and Head of Applied Material Cultures, National College of Art and Design, Dublin bears no visible relation to the Troubles - but it holds a secret. During McAllister's foundation year in Belfast (1981) a nearby church was bombed and the students were sent round to draw it. The stained glass windows had been blown out and McAllister collected "these beautiful little shards of stained glass." She kept them for over 20 years and they became her "treasure" but she never found a use for them until she began to work on a series of embroidered shoes. McAllister says this was a "profound" piece for her, "because out of wanton destruction" she was able to make something opulent that linked her "roots" as a "Belfast girl" with her contemporary textile practice.[13] It is subtle, coded, oblique – treading a symbolically neutral ground. The passage of time allowed the glass shards to be used in a way that acknowledged their past and the relic significance they had acquired in the intervening decades.

Irene MacWilliam has been making work as a response to events in Northern Ireland and the wider world since the mid-1980s; she describes her views as "humanitarian" rather than "political". Each year from 1986 to 2012 she made a *Year Quilt* that featured world events including the conflict in Northern Ireland. MacWilliam had been considering making a quilt to represent the loss of life in the Troubles and people had been sending her pieces of red fabric to use, so when there was a ceasefire in 1994 she thought the time was right to do it. Each of the 3161 pieces making up *Peace Quilt 1* represents someone killed in the Troubles between 1969 and 1994 but the absence of names or details mean it is a largely symbolic representation of the death toll, Figure 4. MacWilliam wanted it to be predominantly red but not solid red "because life is not black and white" and she wanted to reflect that ambiguity in the colour. One of the fabrics, with a print of little pandas, "represented the children caught up or deeply affected by the Troubles," another with a white paintbrush bird motif suggested "hope". MacWilliam was "very specific that there was a patch for every single person … the exact number according to the statistics." She feels this is her most successful quilt as "it appeals to everyone, not just those involved in textiles" and people "open up" and talk when they see it. She explained that when making the quilt she had been "thinking about all the people who had been involved … *thinking* rather than personally *involved*," feeling as she did "a bit like an outsider" belonging to neither "side".[14]

Figure 4
Irene MacWilliam, *Peace Quilt 1 (Common Loss)*, 1996
4-panel quilt 230 x 150 cm

Figure 5
Heather Castles, *Toroid Wound*, 1996
Silk, linen, paper, computer tape, 1cm x 1km (unwound)

At the same time (after the 1994 temporary ceasefire) Heather Castles began work on *Toroid Wound*, Figure 5. It is machine embroidered with 3,341 names as she continued to add to the dead when the ceasefire broke down. The three-layered strip that forms the work has a top layer of paper and a bottom layer of silk and linen, “paper was used to suggest ephemerality, silk – preciousness and death, linen – Irishness and commodification”. The middle layer is an unbroken computer tape of information from a galaxy (M82) ten million light years away, which her husband, an astrophysicist, was studying; Castles explained, “its significance is that the information, which travelled intact during all that time, became corrupted almost immediately after arriving on earth.” The tape is still attached to its torus-like disc which gives the piece its form; wound it is dense and heavy, unwound it stretches to almost 1 km in length. It was not made to be shown as a work of art, she says, “the art was in the making of it, in imagining the differences between the lives of Tracey Munn, Niurati Islania, Matilda Worthington, and the rest of the 3341 listed, whose individuality is evident in their name.”[15] *Toroid Wound* (wound meaning both bound and injury) was shown in 1998 but it was 2015 before the exhibition *Textile Accounts of Conflicts* (Linen Hall Library, Belfast) offered a suitable context to show it again.

Elaine Reichek, a visual artist from New York known for her pioneering conceptual work with stitch, was invited by the Irish Museum of Modern Art (Dublin) and the Orchard Gallery (Derry) to create new work for exhibitions there. The result was *Home Rule* (1993), a historical exploration of the Irish condition with a particular focus on colonialism and the Home Rule campaign, the struggle for independence from British governance that culminated in the Easter Rising (1916) and partition of Ireland (1922).[16] In one piece of work, *Easter Lilies (I.R.A. Provisionals)* 1992*,* Figure 6, Reichek moved the context forward to the Troubles, taking as her starting point an iconic, constructed 1970s Provisional IRA publicity / propaganda image. She used this image to question “iconography and rhetoric … while the barbed wire alludes to the crown of thorns, the knitted wool has a warmth and tactile presence that are intended to implicate the body and its vulnerability.”[17] Reichek says, “by using gendered practices such as knitting and embroidery, I was deliberately foregrounding power relationships.” The aim of the exhibition was to encourage “a ‘reciprocal’ rather than a ‘rhetorical’ engagement with the viewer” and as an “outsider” Reichek was able to “go beyond an oppositional politics toward a more

dialogic engagement".[18] However, in 1993, with the Troubles still on-going, most people in Northern Ireland lacked sufficient distance (emotional or temporal) to engage in open-minded dialogue that transcended the all-pervasive oppositions of religious and national identity, partisan politics, one side or the other. In *Easter Lilies (I.R.A. Provisionals)* Reichek took the two figures in the photograph and knitted them twice, placing them either side of the original image; the first knitting removed the guns, and the second greyed the figures out so they receded into the gallery wall. It would be interesting to see this work exhibited in Belfast, post-conflict, with the figures and the threat receding into history and the space for public dialogue opening up. The iconography of the original photograph and the removal of the figures from their paramilitary context through the act of knitting would now come to the fore and raise questions about power and identity.

Figure 6
Elaine Reichek, *Easter Lilies (IRA Provisionals)*, 1992
Wool, photograph, 5 parts, overall: 110 x 400 cm

Lycia Trouton was born in Belfast and emigrated with her parents to Canada in 1970 when she was three years old. The idea for *The Linen Memorial* evolved when she came across the book, *Lost Lives* (1999), which documented all those killed as a direct result of the Troubles. The *Linen Memorial* (2005) was part of Trouton's doctoral work at Wollongong University, Australia. It consists of 400 white Irish linen handkerchiefs with the 3,720 names of the dead embroidered by volunteers from across the globe, linking the Irish diaspora with home. Trouton's training in conceptual sculpture "where the material speaks for itself" informed the work and the use of linen was iconic to Northern Ireland.[19] In 2007 *The Linen Memorial* was exhibited at the Corrymeela Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, where, at the first annual Day of Private Reflection where it was welcomed and "understood" in this context. However, in the wider societal context of Northern Ireland questions of who should be remembered and how they should be remembered remained politicised and contentious. In Trouton's work the 'remembered dead' included:

> … civilians, members of loyalist and republican groups, political figures, soldiers, joyriders, alleged drug dealers, judges and magistrates, those killed in the course of armed robberies, prison officers, police officers, convicted killers, businessmen, alleged informers, Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) members, those who died on hunger strike, men, women, children, pensioners and unborn babies. They are all here.[20]

The concept of a "memorial" implies equal remembrance of all these dead; but in Northern Ireland equality (even in death) is a complex ethical and philosophical concept that is still deeply contested and divisive. Partisan memorials state various "expressions of loss, desire for revenge, national and religious identity" but to date there is no monument or memorial to *all* the dead of the Troubles.[21] Trouton used the gendered associations of cloth and stitch and the abject associations of the handkerchief and human hair (some of the handkerchiefs incorporated flaws stitched with hair) to create a shared memorial, an abject counter-monument. At a keynote speech in the Linen Hall Library, Belfast (2008) Trouton found there seemed to be two disparate responses - tourists who were "peace loving" and the Northern Ireland public, who saw the artwork installation as "Memorial" and therefore contestable as to who should be remembered and memorialised, why and how.

Group responses - banners and quilts

Historically, many organisations have used banners as identification and for communication. The linen industry was underpinned by the labour of a largely-female workforce, Catholic and Protestant, and this legacy and tradition of stitching (and weaving and the other associated craft and industrial skills) means that embroidered and pieced quilts are a natural symbolic and expressive medium for women from both Protestant and Catholic communities. The focus in this paper is on home-made banners and quilts from a domestic tradition, used as creative political expression, rather than commercially produced banners such as those of the Orange Order.[22] The smaller, hand-made banners of the Women's Suffrage movement are more relevant models and Lisa Tickner (1987) provides a comprehensive study of these. In the late 19th century signature quilts were a popular means of fund raising (especially for Presbyterian churches) and the *Primrose League Quilt* (1888) is a unique example of a politically motivated signature quilt made in Ireland.[23] Better known is the *Holloway Prison Banner* (1910) - embroidered with the names of 80 suffragette hunger-strikers. In prison, suffragettes embroidered their names on handkerchiefs as symbols of resistance, transforming the Victorian tradition of social memento into political petition and the tradition of resistance handkerchiefs continued during the Second World War in Prisoner of War and Concentration Camps. During the 1970s Irish Republican prisoners (in prisons on both the North and South of Ireland) painted handkerchiefs but embroidered handkerchiefs were rare. Republican prisoners at the women's prison at Maghaberry, Lisburn in Northern Ireland, worked a square appliquéd with *Saoirse* (Irish language word for Freedom), and embroidered not with their names, but with demands for women's rights. The square was one of thirty panels made into a large banner *Women's Rights are Human Rights* (1995) for display at the 4th United Nations World Conference on Women, Beijing, China, 1995.[24] The banner represented women from all over Ireland, North and South, urban and rural, of all ages and from different social, cultural and political backgrounds.

The Women Together group was formed in 1970, and in 1995 they decided to make a quilt to mark their 25 years of peace-making. Pat Campbell, a life-long stitcher "of all sorts," organised the making.[25] She had intended to make one quilt but received so many squares that she ended up making three quilts, a *Peace Quilt*, a *Reconciliation Quilt* and a *Women Together Quilt*, Figure 7. The squares were made

by 52 different religious, activist and cultural women's groups and even when the patch was made by one person, the group met to discuss the imagery and how to do it, so hundreds of people were involved. An analysis of the imagery in the Women Together quilts shows a predominance of two types, traditional patchwork imagery (often combined with a peace emblem or phrase) and peace imagery. The quilts were made in 1995 when there was a gathering momentum toward peace, of the 67 squares, 20 contain the imagery of a dove, and a further 9 contain other symbolic peace imagery. The words *Peace*, *Hope* and *Love* feature prominently and many squares use colour symbolically - interlocking the symbolically and politically (for Ireland) important colours of red, blue, white, green and orange. Women Together brought the quilts with them when they were invited to speak, in Ireland, England and Europe; when invited to Warrington in England in 1998 (following the IRA bombing that killed two children in 1993) they joined a peace walk from Manchester to Warrington, carrying the quilts as banners of sympathy and solidarity. The visual similarity of these quilts to their traditional, functional counterpart is because they were initiated, designed and made within the amateur patchwork community using the skills, techniques and designs they had at their disposal. It should be recognised, however, that the intention and purpose of the Women Together quilts was neither decorative nor functional - but rather a powerful political statement of peace-making.

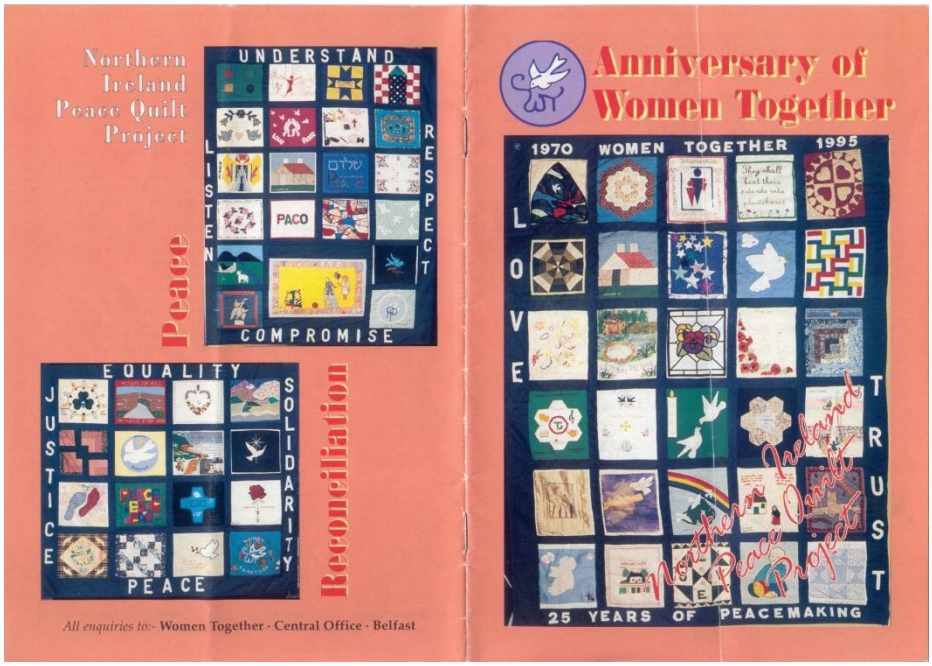

Figure 7
Women Together, *Peace Quilt Project*, 1995
Pamphlet loaned by Pat Campbell

A selection of panels from the *AIDS Memorial Quilt* was shown at the Ulster Hall, Belfast in 1991, and Relatives for Justice, an advocacy and support group representing the Irish Nationalist and Republican community were inspired to create their own living memorial to remember their dead, especially those whose deaths were "politicised" or surrounded by silence or stigma. Squares are completed by families (with help if required), and the deceased person's interests, hobbies, beliefs and outlooks are represented by embroidered images, text and photographs. Some of the panels are personalised with the inclusion of fabric from the deceased's clothing and some of the imagery is symbolic. Each panel consists of 49 squares, the first panel being completed in 2001. There are now 10 panels in the *Remembering Quilt* with each representing deaths in the Nationalist / Republican community only, and with the quilt design and content making no attempt to find neutral ground or be conciliatory. Instead the squares make a powerful statement by using strong, emotive imagery, apportioning blame and telling their personal stories in a direct manner that produces a powerful emotional affect. The objections to the inclusion of a *Remembering Quilt* panel in an exhibition in Ballymena, Northern Ireland in 2013 was an indication of the on-going divisions in that society, of the tensions that result from conflicted, contested memory, and the continuing memorialisation disputes of who should be remembered and how.[26]

Wave Trauma Centre (WAVE) was set up in Northern Ireland in 1991 as a cross-community organisation to support those bereaved or traumatised by the Northern Irish conflict. As part of their work they run creative arts projects where the therapeutic approach places emphasis on the process rather than the finished work. An all-inclusive, cross-community position requires symbolically neutral imagery and a universal rather than individual focus that does not demand attention for the individual or make explicit the circumstances of the loss of a loved one (which inevitably implies blame). In Northern Ireland symbolic imagery featured strongly on all the community quilts that were taking a peace or reconciliation stance; the WAVE wall-hanging *Reflection on Loss – from Darkness to Light* (1995) is typical in its use of the symbolic imagery of a lighthouse. WAVE launched a new *Quilt of Remembrance* (2014), Figure 8, telling the story of the Troubles from 1969 to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The intervening passage of time since the first wall-

hanging has allowed the imagery to be direct and representational rather than symbolic and universal. It still focuses on common rather than individual experience, so people from both (and neither) sides of the sectarian divide can find their experiences of the Troubles represented. The finished quilt is full of details (not only of the conflict) but also of daily life during the 1970s. This new quilt indicates a growing readiness to explore an account of life in Northern Ireland during the Troubles that can accommodate multiple and conflicting memories and histories. Participants worked on panels and incidents that they personally found difficult in "recognition that suffering takes place independent of religion or cultural background."[27] The quilt treads a careful line in balancing conflicting memories, evidence of many hours of discourse and a high level of awareness and sensitivity to the complexity of the task.

Figure 8
WAVE Ballymoney, *Quilt of Remembrance*, 2014, 210 x 210 cm

In Northern Ireland throughout the Troubles those who strove to maintain a neutral position were a largely invisible, non-homogenous, unstructured collection of individuals, encompassing the full diversity of society across politics, religion, social class, race and gender. As a non-group they had no clear identity and no historical symbolism or imagery that they could draw upon to make their position manifest in a visual way. During the Troubles this neutral position was often conceived of as a negative identity, a feeling of belonging to "neither side", rather than having a positive and unified position. Now post-conflict (and especially with funded peace and reconciliation projects) there is a pressure in Northern Ireland to express a neutral but positive, cross-community, shared identity, but clearly the visual language to do this effectively is still lacking. In 2006 (post-conflict) four groups came together from different sides of the divide to make a cross-community quilt, *Shared Visions*. The project was facilitated by Quaker House Belfast and the groups were from so-called inter-face areas of inner-city Belfast (where Nationalist, Unionist, Republican and Loyalist communities butt against each other in the densely configured urban layout of the city) that had experienced long-term and deeply entrenched sectarian attitudes and actions. Thirty-two women worked together to make a quilt that demonstrated "a tentative coming together to express a vision for a new inclusive Northern Ireland society" and this – it was established - required a use of imagery that would be acceptable to all four groups.[28]

A visual analysis of the *Shared Visions* quilt demonstrates the lack of an existing visual language through which this "new inclusive" (but as yet tentative and needy of non-contentious conflicted representation) society can be expressed. The women have inventively used the symbolism available to them and the result is an interesting juxtaposition of the two dominant cultural and political traditions, in carefully calculated and balanced equilibrium. This is a piece of work made by women who thoroughly understand the subtle significances of the nuances of colour and imagery and how such images will be interpreted in Northern Ireland. In addition to the nationalistic colours of the British and Irish flags, orange is inextricably linked with unionism, green with nationalism. Symbols of all sorts also carry a divided significance in Northern Ireland and are carefully avoided in the quilt, except where they are balanced – a Loyalist Lambeg drum counterpointed with Irish dancers, Loyalist-aligned orange lilies with Irish-symbolic shamrocks, a hurling stick from a

quintessentially Gaelic game with a football that is more associated with British dominant sport. Of the 36 squares, 21 express their idea of an inclusive society in terms of an equal balance of both sides, represented mostly by the balancing of colours or symbols, Figure 9. Rozsika Parker described the suffragettes' use of symbolic imagery to demand "equality, not androgyny."[29] Perhaps this is what these makers want, to live side by side in equality and peace but retain their identity – in the imagery, even the newly hatched chicks have emerged from a shared egg draped in their identifying flags. The purpose of the *Shared Visions* quilt was to create a process where women from conflicting backgrounds came together round a table to stitch. The making process is a shared activity with a shared goal and sewing creates a space where the hands are busy and there is no need for direct eye contact or conversation - communication is therefore facilitated without reconciliation being forced. For women coming from diametrically opposed political positions this was critically important.

Figure 9
Quaker House Belfast, *Shared Visions*, 2008 (details)

Healing by making

Carole Kane's involvement in Northern Ireland's conflict transformation and peacebuilding through creativity began in 1998 following the Omagh bombing that left twenty-nine people and two unborn children dead and a further 220 injured. In a massive outpouring of emotion flowers were sent from all over the world. These became a potent symbol of sympathy, solidarity and hope for the town, becoming "imbued with a power of healing, both for those who placed them and for those who suffered in the atrocity." People were reluctant to allow the council to remove the flowers when they had died, and when Carole Kane heard a radio discussion about what should be done with the flowers she suggested they could be used to make paper "so there would be a continuation" of them after their immediate use at the site of the bomb in Omagh.

The *Petals of Hope* project developed from this. Omagh Council stipulated that there would be colour and Kane stipulated it would be a cross-community project for all those who "wanted to be involved or needed to be involved" and the project brought together primary and secondary school children and adults.[30] The flower heads were removed, dried and mixed with dyed paper pulp to make paper, using a wide range of colours "to avoid any politically motivated misinterpretation". Three large murals were made, one each for Omagh (in Northern Ireland), Buncrana (in the Republic of Ireland) and Madrid (in Spain: children on an educational exchange between Buncrana and Madrid were among those killed). Pieces of paper, which were later used to construct small individual panels for each of the bereaved families, were made by adults from the local community. Kane learnt much about the process of grieving and how to work with art in that context; the adult participants were "almost entirely women" and they dealt with their grief by "talking to each-other and crying openly" but they were concerned about their "menfolk" who were "bottling up their emotions behind an angry silence."[31] The use of universal peace symbols is not always an indication of a reflective posture; such symbols are also resorted to in times of distress, in the absence of any other adequate visual language, and when any other form of imagery is too near to the subject and too distressing. Kane normally discourages the use of universal symbols, but in workshops following the Omagh bombing she felt the circumstances were too fragile and she couldn't say "no doves" because the people "had been challenged enough."[32]

Carole Kane believes that “creativity in the post-conflict approach” enables people to “explore” and to see things from “different perspectives” and that “the process is as much the product as the product is … I am always thinking about what has gone on in the room and it is not always about what has gone into the frame.” Although these sorts of projects and workshops are about the process, textiles as a media can play a particular role in facilitating conversation. Kane has found that people are often “reluctant to draw, they feel they can’t do it.” There is a vulnerability with drawing but with textiles people can collage a few things and “something can start to emerge … and then they realise they can draw with a needle and thread.” Kane thinks there is something in the actual material “the softness and pliability and manipulative qualities of fabric” and in the way that stitching is “a methodical, rhythmical process” that you do with your fingers while “the rhythm allows you to think about other things as well.” Some people are intimidated by a group where they are expected to speak but creative group activities “often don’t have words connected to them” and there is “a freedom of speech and a freedom of listening” in this safe place that encourages an “informal, explorative learning” that can change people.[33] The *Petals of Hope* project has been cited as an example of belief in the creative act; as an exemplary project it can act as a model for creativity in the process of healing.[34]

War textiles

An exhibition *Weavings of War* (2005-07 United States) consisted of war textiles from around the world.[35] The curators noted that these textiles only appeared in societies where textiles were already a “pervasive medium of deep cultural significance” - they allowed the makers to tell their stories of “fear of death and dispossession and the desire for liberation or revenge” and outsiders to “bear witness to the conflict.”[36] Following a conference on women’s textile work in the informal sector, *The Art of Survival* (1995) in Nűrnberg, Germany, Gaby Franger curated a selection of the work into a travelling exhibition, *Art of Survival: Fabric Images of Women’s Daily Lives*. Roberta Bacic (a Chilean academic and human rights campaigner now living in Northern Ireland) was invited to bring this exhibition to Derry, Northern Ireland in 2008.[37] As guest curator, Bacic extended the scope of the exhibition adding some of her personal collection of Latin American arpilleras to the international quilts and showing 26 Irish quilts as well.[38]

Since this exhibition, *The Art of Survival International and Irish Quilts* (Derry 2008) Bacic has continued to show arpilleras and quilts with political stories in international exhibitions, bringing Irish textiles that had never been shown in public before to a global audience. Latin American arpilleras are pieced, appliquéd and embroidered - making them a particularly resonant form in Ireland where the textile traditions are similar. War textiles have both individual and universal aspects; there is the individual experience of the maker and the person viewing the work but there is also a collective experience represented by the textiles and a collective experience that informs the response. The Northern Irish audience understands the experiences represented by the arpilleras mediated through their own experiences of living in a "conflicted" society. Beyond these commonalities is the context of the universal human experience of suffering and loss. Young (2005) discussed the problems of "comparing the war textiles of different cultures and nations" and the risks "of de-historicizing them and minimizing and homogenizing the experiences of the vastly different groups and contexts they represent." He concludes however that despite these risks they have a "common maternity ... most are done by women … often innocent bystanders and victims, and only occasionally war combatants themselves."[39] Northern Irish textiles made in response to the Troubles differ from arpilleras and other war textiles in that they were not made for commercial sale or for an outside audience to collect in support of the cause. They were made as personal (often private) expressions of the makers' experiences and it is only in recent years that they have been exhibited together and contextualised as 'conflict textiles'.[40]

Memory

In Northern Ireland, as a society moving out of conflict, the challenge is to find ways *as a community* to deal with the experiences and the memories of the past. Jelin (2003) discusses the "struggles for memory" that follow conflict and the difficulties of accommodating these conflicting memories. There is no "one memory," it is "memory against memory" and this is a natural and necessary part of the post-conflict process.

> In every case, *once sufficient time has elapsed to make possible the establishment of a minimum degree of distance between past and present*, alternative (even rival) interpretations of that recent past and its memory occupy a central place in cultural and political debates.[41]

This requires a collective rather than individual ability to be able to maintain a distance from the past while actively and reflexively engaging in debate about it. Research suggests this “sufficient time” may be 15 to 25 years in an entrenched community, and it may be even longer before memory can be historicised and examined for different meanings. Lycia Trouton returned to Northern Ireland in 2014-15 and toured with *The Linen Memorial* to a number of venues within both communities in south County Down, Northern Ireland. Eight years on from the first exhibition of the work sufficient time has lapsed for *The Linen Memorial* to act as a catalyst for collective debate. The most recent exhibition was at Parliament Buildings, Stormont, outside Belfast for the (now public) Day of Reflection, Figure 10. The journey of *The Linen Memorial* from Corrymeela Centre for Peace and Reconciliation (2007) to Stormont, seat of Northern Ireland Assembly (2015) parallels the long, slow journey of society toward the re-examination of conflicting memories and the recognition of plurality. Art and culture can provide the spaces necessary to facilitate these debates and there are plans to exhibit *The Linen Memorial* at one of Northern Ireland’s main art venues (2019) which will finally bring the work into an uncontested public space where it can fulfil the promise and purpose Trouton had imagined for it - to open up a public “conversation.”

Figure 10
NI Secretary of State, Theresa Villiers with artist Lycia Trouton at the showing of the *Linen Memorial* at Stormont, 22nd June 2015 Photo: Northern Ireland Office

Northern Ireland is mid-way through a decade of centenaries, from the Home Rule Bill and the signing of the Ulster Covenant (1912), through the Easter Rising (1916), to the Civil War and Partition of Ireland (1922). Communities have shared memories that can extend back over nine decades – the lifetimes of their elders. Further back there are events that are chosen to be remembered as shared trauma and these things shape collective identities – historical and long-passed events like the Plantation of Ulster (1609) and the Irish Potato Famine (1845-49). It may be approaching 50 years since the outbreak of the Troubles but it will be 2080 before the Omagh bombing has passed from the living memory of the children caught up in it.

Conclusion

Cloth is a highly symbolic and gendered material. It relates to humanity, carries our traces and evokes memory; and the language of cloth gives us a way to talk about the fabric of society. Colour is also symbolically charged; the whiteness of pristine linen suggests the absorption of tears, forgiveness, cleansing; red, ripped cloth is angry, visceral, bloodied. The makers discussed in this paper used textiles in different ways and to different ends – as individual art responses, collaborative community quilts, and artist-led projects for remembrance, healing and peace. Declan McGonagle, Director of the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, curated "non-art" bonfires and murals into an exhibition, *A Shout in the Street* (2008) Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast, on the basis that they were "connected in the field of experience".[42] The textiles described in this paper are no less connected. Their omission from mainstream exhibitions and literature has meant that a unique creative response, almost exclusively by women, is missing from the broader discourses around the art of the Troubles.

Northern Ireland, as a society, is still deeply divided. The challenge in years to come will be to find ways to deal with the past that can accommodate the co-existence of conflicting memories, experiences and truths. Society in Northern Ireland is just beginning to move into a phase where there is sufficient distance from the Troubles to engage in reflexive debate and "spaces" where the past can be critically examined will be needed at community level as well as in government. Cultural domains are ideally situated to provide inclusive spaces for open thinking and textiles can play a

role in this provision. Making and doing with textiles is already an inclusive practice embedded across all communities; it has the potential to be used creatively and constructively - especially if it is remembered that the value may be in what happens in the spaces around the making not in a finished artwork.

NOTES

1. During a civil rights march in Derry (1972) British troops opened fire on demonstrators – the event became known as ‘Bloody Sunday’ and the photograph of Father Daly became one of the most iconic images of the Troubles.
2. Discussion at Void Gallery, Derry, 25th July 2013. The handkerchief is now in the Free Derry Museum. Also see Stallybrass, P., (1993) Worn Worlds: Clothes, mourning and the life of things.
3. Lippard (1984) p.12
4. Harper (2012) ‘Patch 1’, Vol 1, p.xv (each volume is introduced by a personal ‘Patch’)
5. A Bog is an (extensive) area of wet, spongy ground composed mainly of decayed peat moss (sphagnum).
6. Interview Harper, 2012
7. BBC ‘The Disappeared: Hidden story of Northern Ireland Troubles’. The ‘disappeared’ were persons abducted, killed and secretly buried during the 1970s and 80s. The IRA admitted responsibility for most of these deaths in 1999 but work to identify the sites and recover the bodies is still on-going.
8. Interview Harper, 2012
9. Mahon (1994) p.61
10. Interview Harper, 2012
11. Barber (2013) p.209
12. Interview Duffy, 2013
13. Interview McAllister, 2011
14. Interview MacWilliam, 2011
15. Interview Castles, 2014
16. Partition created Northern Ireland (6 counties that remained part of the United Kingdom, governed by the British Government) and the Republic of Ireland (26 counties that became a sovereign state governed by the Irish Government).
17. E-mail correspondence, Reichek, Aug. 2015
18. ibid
19. Skype interview Trouton, 2013 see www.linenmemorial.org
20. McKitterick (1999) p.15
21. Leonard (1997) cites temporary art projects.
22. see published work by Neil Jarman.
23. Valerie Wilson (curator of textiles, Ulster Folk Museum) records that most of the signature quilts in the collection are Presbyterian fund-raising projects (each signature equates to a financial contribution). The Primrose League Quilt in the Hatfield House Collection, England, dates from the First Home Rule campaign, it was made in Tralee, County Kerry, Ireland (where there was a large Militia Barracks) and was given to the then Conservative Prime Minister Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, as a token of the signatories’ support for his opposition of Home Rule (whether it was also a fund-raiser is unknown).

24. Organised by the Committee for the Administration of Justice (CAJ) Belfast.
25. Interview Campbell, 2011
26. One of the *Remembering Quilt* panels was to be exhibited at *Stitching and Unstitching the Troubles* (2013), as part of a selection of exhibits 'Objects Transformed by Conflict' put together by the organisation Healing Through Remembering (HTR). Five days before the exhibition opened HTR were advised that the *Remembering Quilt* panel would not be acceptable as it could cause offence and raise community tensions (tensions were already heightened as it was July, the Unionist marching season), so HTR withdraw all their exhibits from the exhibition.
27. WAVE (2014) p.5
28. Statement accompanying quilt, on display at Frederick Street Meeting House, Belfast.
29. Parker (1983) p.198
30. Interview Kane, 2011
31. Kane (1999), p.26
32. Interview Kane, 2011
33. ibid
34. Lederach (2010) pp.157-158
35. Organised by Michigan State University, Vermont Folklife Center and City Lore, New York. Shown at seven venues in the United States, now available as a virtual exhibition [http://citylore.org]
36. Cooke & MacDowell (2005) exhibition publication p.26
37. Shown at venues across Derry: Tower Museum, Harbour Museum, Workhouse Museum, Junction, Verbal Arts Centre, Void Gallery, Playhouse, Diocesan Centre and Museum of Free Derry.
38. Arpillera are three-dimensional appliqued textiles from Latin America, which originated in Chile in the late 1960s. The hessian backing fabric (*arpillera* in Spanish) became the name for this type of work, typically measuring 30cm x 50cm.
39. Young, J., in Cooke & MacDowell (2005) p.31-35
40. Selected exhibitions of 'Conflict Textiles' in Northern Ireland, curated by Roberta Bacic, include: The Art of Survival International and Irish Quilts (Derry 2008); The Human Cost of War (Derry 2010); Story Makers (Derry 2008-2012); Stitching and Unstitching the Troubles (Coleraine, Ballymena, Limavady 2012-2013); Textile Accounts of Conflicts (Belfast 2015). Images and documentation available on Conflict Textiles archive http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/
41. Jelin (2003) p.xvii
42. McGonagle (2008) p.32

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